

"What We Want in Motion Pictures" by the Censors

By JOSEPH LEVENSON,
Secretary of the Motion Picture Commission
of the State of New York.

"WHAT is it that you censors want?
What are you driving at?"

The questioner was a great maker of photoplays. The New York State Commission had expressed disapproval of the theme and character of a screen drama which his corporation had made. The picture in doubt was an unoriginal "feature photoplay" whose justification for being was, in his eyes and in the mind of his director, simply that it showed how some wives are justified in sentimental conversations with men other than their husbands.

"You see," he explained, "the film teaches a bad husband what he may expect of his wife if he doesn't reform. Great moral lesson."

I wanted to show him what was wrong—what it is we want. I believe I could point an example better than I could explain.

"Come," I invited, "let's look at a news reel now showing at a nearby theater."

We went together to look at this film of news events of the day. After several scenes of varying interest there came a view of President Harding, the White House in the background, receiving a delegation of wounded soldiers.

The next scene presented what has come to be a movie type—a "bathing girl." She was of the kind that does not swim. Her suit was closely fitting and in one piece. On her face was a vapid grin, and in her unrefined carriage was self-consciousness of just why she was posing for a scene in this "news reel."

"There," I said to the great producer, "is a sample of what we would like to correct."

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Aren't bathing girls O. K.?"

"In their place, yes," I replied. "But how about the President?"

"He's O. K., too, isn't he?" exclaimed the producer. I could see he began to suspect I was thinking of politics and was a Democrat. He simply was not mentally capable of understanding the atrocious taste in associating a professional "bathing girl" of the type that poses before a movie camera in a daring bathing suit in the same news reel with the President of the United States!

When I explained to him he put me down as a fool and went away convinced that we were worse than he thought we were.

But that was why we objected to his "feature film"—the deplorable lack of good taste and the tangible offense from which we could delete a few of his objectionable scenes—its teaching the lesson that irritated wives may be justified in offending conventions.

Typical of the Attitude Of Mind of Producers

It is the attitude of mind that prompts a director to think it proper to present a posing bathing girl whose only appeal is her lack of costume in the same film with the President of our country that is wrong with the movies. It is this same mental abnormality which can create no better "theme" for a photoplay than the justification of conjugal laxities. And it is this sad mental viewpoint that we, the censors, believe must be banished from the film making world.

That censorship in itself is an attack upon liberty is the stock argument against all censorship. So is the State's law against murder. The law deprives the murderer of his liberty to slay; the censors hope to deprive the makers of film plays of liberty to coarsen the minds of the young people of America.

The conditions we want to correct appear even in the foundation of film production. The authors who give birth to the photo drama plots shout aloud that we are "thrilling genius." This cry alarmed us at first. Now we ask, "Where is the genius among the photoplay authors to throttle?" I see none of it—know of none.

It is genius we want to encourage. We would like the situation so adjusted that the writing of a photoplay would require genius. We are persuaded that genius would discover great themes, that it would not be content with the easy task of pandering to only the basest of human emotions; that it would seek thrills and suspenses that are not so obvious and mechanical.

A popular motion picture star, who often directs the writing of her plays, said not long ago in a published interview: "Motion picture audiences in their mental appreciations are only the equal of the fourteen-year-old child."

And that is the trouble with the author who complains we throttle his genius. He is capable of dealing only with such emotions as are easily aroused and understood in the fourteen-year-old. If he essays to deal with more mature themes in his photo drama he has not enough genius to translate them into situations in any convincing way. So we of the regulatory commission are persuaded the "movies" need genius.

When we object to an offensive representation of some sordid episode the authors complain:

"But it is our function to portray life as it is. We must not be hindered. We must point our morals by showing what life is made up of or the audiences won't understand us."

Now that is just what we of the commission want—we want life portrayed as it is. But the photoplay authors—those whose works we most often meet with—seem to think life is made up of the morbid, the



Above—Joseph Levenson, George H. Cobb and Mrs. Eli T. Hosmer, the Motion Picture Commission of New York, examining a doubtful reel. At right is Will H. Hays, ex-Postmaster-General and the new big boss of the movie industry.

vicious, the malicious. One of the most beautiful things in the world is a rose. But the average writer of photoplays thinks only of the poison ivy.

"There is no drama in the rose," he will declare. "No 'pep'; no action; no thrill. A rose does nothing—just hangs on a stem. But poison ivy—ah!—there you have your drama, for it will make you suffer! There you have your 'pep,' for it will make you run! There you have your thrill, for it is dangerous!"

Are we members wrong in urging that the film world needs the genius who can understand that the rose is symbolical of real life—life as it is—and that poison ivy represents only the minorities of the underworld? True, the mind that can deal only in the emotions of a fourteen-year-old audience will turn quickest to the poison ivy.

But isn't there more of drama hidden in the rose? It hangs modestly on a stem, but hasn't it in its beauty and potency for great dramatic climaxes than the evil poison vine? And would not the genius extract more genuine "pep" and "thrill" from the beautiful rose—the beautiful side of life which is the more real—than from the ugly poison plant that is repellent?

We of the commission want more of the rose and less of the poison ivy.

In this connection, however, we may speak only of what we would like to do to improve the "movies." It must be remembered, though, that we are censors, not teachers. We have authority only to "cut out"—we cannot, unfortunately, "add on." We are obliged to deal in details, not in fundamentals.

If I could enlarge my authority arbitrarily I would examine very closely into the next factor after the author, the producer—the money providing maker of the films.

None of these will admit they purposely make photo plays to appeal to the low tastes of the morbid minded. I declare, flatly, that many of them do.

With very few exceptions producers refuse to consider their photoplay making as anything else than a scheme to get quick and "large" money. They are incapable of realizing that they hold in their hands a great medium for the betterment of the world; a dangerous medium, which if improperly handled may bring down society with just that sort of tremendous climax they like to picture—like the burning of Rome, for example. That they have in their hands all the power of church, school and State combined they do not realize, or,

if they do, they ignore the realization and seek to turn their power only to the quick accumulation of dimes.

The producers as a rule have no originality, no conception of the big things of life, or of great ambitions. There are few Charles Frohmans, for instance, few who ask when they propose a photoplay—is it a good photoplay for audiences to witness? Therefore, there are few who will be remembered and honored as is Charles Frohman.

The censors would like to bring about a better understanding upon the part of the producer that they have not yet touched upon the great field of photo-dramatic art. But it is a hard task. So far the most popular idea of art is expressed in an artist's model, posing in an elaborate studio setting for a dilettante, with a velvet coat and an evil design. The "movies" need "creators" to take the place of many of our "producers."

The producers will not be convinced that the public wants entertainment from the screen and that it will attend theaters in great numbers if good, clean, wholesome photoplays are produced. The clean plays—without the least characteristic of evil—would be more popular than those which

our standards—as fixed by law—are beyond the intention of the producer. He might have accepted a scenario for production which seemed to him quite proper as well as entertaining. But the director has final power and he can make the photo play as his mind sees it. And we wish the photoplay director averaged higher in merit. Too many of them can reproduce only the atmosphere of the life they lead or witness.

We cannot, of course, dictate to the industry the character of its personnel. That is not the province of the censors. We can depend only upon the cooperation of the producers—nearly all of whom, I must say, are trying hard to attain improvement to the utmost. But I may say improvement depends largely upon new blood, broader and bigger minds among the directors.

Illustrates His Point

By Incident of Ambassador
Perhaps I may best illustrate this point if I recall that not long ago we were obliged to approve a costly "feature" film, in which the director exhibited a distinguished American as a most undignified

who are deserving of the highest commendation. But those who have but restricted ideals and who are familiar only with the crudities in human emotion are far too many.

Not long ago I had occasion to delete a murder scene. I could see no reason for this murder incident, and said so.

"But, my dear Censor," exclaimed the director, "I must get that character out of the way. I must remove him from contact with the plot. That is the only way I can do it. I simply have to kill him."

Think of it! The only way to remove the character was to kill him—the obvious, easy, most ingenious like way!

"Very well then," I said. "Kill him if that's the only way you can think of to get him out of your plot, but I can't allow you to hint to young boys in your audience that they too can remove any one in their way simply by murdering him. You'll have to do the murdering 'off the screen.'"

This ruling was a great "injustice" to that director.

"But how in the world can I make the audience understand he's dead if I don't let them see him killed?" the director pleaded. I am afraid I was curt.

"Learn how," was all I replied.

In many cases directors have no qualities

"Genius, Good Taste and the Common Sense That Values the Rose More Than the Poison Ivy Must Begin to Show in Photoplay Making," Says the State's Commission

succeed only because of their adaptability to worded advertising and titling.

I grant that the producers are seeing the light in many instances. The result is that good, clean pictures are being produced; and, I dare say, these pictures are more profitable in the long run than the other kind.

We of the commission agree that many of the pictures which are objectionable to

hanger-on around a gambling resort. And his wife, who in herself represented American womanhood, flagrantly accepted attentions from other men who also were habitués of Monte Carlo!

The director who knew so little of life and so little of the evil psychological effect such a representation might have upon thoughtless young women must be an obstacle to the improvement of the photoplay, and yet he is but one of the predominant class. We should have the right to bar such a photo drama in its entirety. Unquestionably there are many directors

of mind to recommend them for their authoritative functions. Some are not men who by any argument may be said to have a suitable point of view toward life, an artistic justification, an adequate fineness of spirit, nor a sufficiently sound moral background to direct the making of a picture that it may have a positively constructive or even a harmless purpose and influence.

It is curious that a very small portion of the public knows what the standards of the censorship laws are. Here is a concise statement:

"No motion picture will be licensed which may be classified, or any part thereof, as tending to corrupt morals or incite to crime."

That is as far as the censors may go. But we may use our influence in so far as it is acceptable to guide the makers of the photo drama into paths that will lead them far from even unintentional conflict with our authority.

Children look upon the movie-theater as their own. They learn of life from the screen. They find in the postures and movements of the phantom players their own ideals, and they are imitative.

In a picture in which crime is glorified—wherein the "master criminal" is made a tremendous power for evil, wherein indiscriminate murders and abductions are shown, and wherein the finest "ingenuities" the combined author, scenarist and director can devise are put into the mind of the master criminal—there is much that certainly would mislead the mind of a child, and much more which would inflame the distorted brain of the unfortunate subnormal person, to whom the moving picture acts as a guide and an inspiration.

State Has Its Duty

To Protect Its Youth

The State, in its duty to the public, must safeguard society and protect its youth. Any fair minded person must admit that the moving picture play has not existed in the past—before the days of regulatory laws—with any deep regard for its effect upon the minds of children or the ignorant. Its sole purpose has been to lure to the box office. This situation is being improved, and must be further remedied.

The little theaters in the tenement sections and in the little communities present a problem. Such theaters now are showing the lurid serial pictures which worldlywise folk believe are consigned to the past! Photoplays in which villains are glorified second only to glorification of the hero! The unending battle between the fair and the sinister, with the sinister side frequently triumphant, seems necessary to "thrill" and "suspense." Children crave excitement. In some instances the proprietors of the squalid little places which cater to the movie going public in poorer communities are not of a particularly high type. In choosing pictures to exhibit to their patrons their own tastes are uppermost. They can see elements of interest only in the "thrillers," the lurid, vicious pictures which start ugly thoughts in warped minds and which do amazing injury to growing and impressionable school children, who scribble and save to satisfy this cultivated craving for the sensational and untrue.

Unfortunately, many of these pictures were released before the commission came into power. But they will wear out sometime, and we are looking forward to that time. We want no more of them. The serial of the future must be based upon some other theme than morbid crime.

What we aim is to make it impossible for the exhibitors in the squalid sections to have any choice. Since they are not capable of choosing good photoplays, then the right of choice should be taken from them. This only can be done by assuring that there soon will be no pictures other than good ones in so far as we can make them good.

The industry—like all other industries—has its conscientious clean minded representatives. Unquestionably some of the big producers have ideals which are good and which they are trying to live up to. But—like all other industries—the moving picture business has its unworthy parasites.

We intend there shall be no more opium dens where the surroundings are luxurious and beautiful women and handsome men smoke jeweled pipes. There shall be no more elopements of married men and women; no more "love stories" in which the wrong and the unconventional view of marriage obligations is condoned and held up as the right example; and then, some day, perhaps, we will be without that class of director, producer and player who will think it proper to allow an immodest, frivolous "bathing girl" to exhibit herself in the same film with the President of our country.

What the New "Film-Czar" Says

Special Dispatch to THE NEW YORK HERALD.
New York Herald Bureau.
Washington, D. C., March 11.

TO THE NEW YORK HERALD, WILL S. Hays, the new czar of the motion picture industry, said, upon taking his new office last Monday:

"The potentialities of the motion picture for moral influence and education are limitless. Therefore, its integrity should be protected as we protect the integrity of our churches and its quality should be developed as we develop the quality of our schools."

"Motion pictures may well become the national stabilizer. They already are the principal amusement of the majority of the people; they are the sole amusement of millions."

"The chief purposes of the new association of Motion Picture Producers will be, first:

"To attain and maintain the highest possible

standard of motion picture production, and second:

"To develop to the highest possible degree the spiritual, moral and educational value of the film industry."

"The men who have pioneered in the industry already have accomplished many wonderful things. In uniting now to strive jointly for the purposes of the new national association these men are looking very far ahead, indeed, toward a great good for all the people, and will render a distinctive public service."

"It is a tremendous undertaking and I approach it with real concern, but with that confidence which grows from an earnest purpose and from the conviction that we will have the generous help of every one in accomplishing what must be recognized as an effort for the good of all."

These plans of Mr. Hays are very interesting. As Postmaster-General he virtually revolutionized the Post Office Department within a year. As "general manager" of

the film industry he may make changes just as monumental.

One of the suggestions that have been made already and supported by Mr. Hays is that special attention be given to pictures for boys, covering nature studies, physical training, hunting, fishing, camping and patriotic purposes and that these pictures be shown free to boys on Saturday mornings when there is no school. It is Mr. Hays's opinion that widespread adoption of the suggestion would bring about a very large good and not unlike that accomplished by the Boy Scouts of America.

Mr. Hays is not going to pass his time at Hollywood improving the character of the motion picture performers. That is no part of his job. He is going to devote himself to the broader, more important field of setting the industry, so far as it applies to the character of pictures and the methods of distribution, on a better basis, and to develop the educational possibilities of the film.